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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1847
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6680
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5201
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6070
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000079

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND'S GOVERNING COALITION GAINS MODESTLY IN
BY-ELECTIONS

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (SBU) Thailand held January 11 by-elections for 29 vacant constituency-based seats in the House of Representatives. Preliminary results show that the current governing coalition parties won 20 of the 29 seats, modestly increasing its majority in the House but not significantly changing the balance of power. The pro-Thaksin Puea Thai (PT) Party won only 5 of the 13 seats that its predecessor, the People's Power Party, had held; the Democrat Party (DP) appears to have gained seven seats but did not even contest the populous Northeast and still will have fewer House seats than Puea Thai. There have been a few dozen formal complaints in connection with the by-elections, but the public appears to accept the result as legitimate. Separately, the Democrat Party candidate, Sukhumbhand Paribatra, won the January 11 election for Bangkok Governor, according to unofficial results.

12. (C) Comment: It was clear prior to the by-elections that the number of seats at stake and the distribution between government and opposition strongholds did not hold the potential to alter the balance in the parliament. Neither the government nor the opposition viewed these by-elections as critical, though the Democrats set an ambitious target for the coalition of 20 seats, a target they met. We believe the results most likely reflect local political dynamics rather than any manifestation of sentiment on national issues. Perhaps most important was the fact that the voting took place in a peaceful, orderly manner, with only moderate turnout in some cases, indicating that the electorate is less excited than the fervent yellow- and red-shirt protesters who have grabbed headlines for the past five months. End Summary and Comment.

THE NUMBERS

13. (U) The Constitutional Court's December 2 dissolution of the People's Power Party (PPP), Chart Thai Party, and Matchima Thippathai forced most of the affiliated legislators to move to new parties, but 29 constituency-based House seats

became vacant due to a five-year ban on political activities by members of the dissolved parties' executive boards. (PPP executives held 13 of the vacated seats; Chart Thai executives held 16.) On January 11, by-elections took place to fill the 29 seats.

¶4. (U) According to press reporting of unofficial results, the winning candidates for the 29 by-elections were from the following parties:

- Chart Thai Pattana (new Chart Thai).....	10
- Democrat Party.....	7
- Puea Thai (new PPP).....	5
- Pracharaj.....	4
- Motherland Party.....	3

¶5. (SBU) The Democrat, Chart Thai Pattana, and Motherland parties are in the governing coalition; the PT and Pracharaj are in opposition. By some counts in the local media, if the formal by-election results track with the current unofficial results, the pro-Government parties and their allies who lack a party affiliation will hold a combined total of 271 seats (58.5 percent). The Puea Thai Party and the Pracharaj Party -- the two in opposition to the government -- will hold a combined total of 192 seats (41.5 percent). (Note: Other calculations, based on the voting pattern on December 15, in which three minor parties split over whom to support as PM, put the new margin closer, at 254 - 209.)

¶6. (SBU) The Democrats won one of the two seats contested in the North, but did not even contest the 10 seats up for election in Thailand's Northeast, the main bastion of pro-Thaksin sentiment. Embassy contacts provided several explanations for the by-election results, in particular

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attributing the failure of Puea Thai to hold the PPP seats to the relatively low quality of Puea Thai candidates after two rounds of disqualifications removed many of the most qualified pro-Thaksin politicians. They also cited reduced financial support from Thaksin, while PT candidates faced higher campaign expenditures by other parties. (Comment: both of these explanations appear plausible. End Comment.)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? PERHAPS NOT MUCH

¶7. (SBU) A meaningful number of former non-executive PPP legislators associated with banned executive Newin Chidchob, 23 in all, still lack a party affiliation; these MPs have until early February (60 days from the Court's ruling) to become members of a new party. This number of unaffiliated MPs makes it impossible to provide a firm count of the number of MPs aligned with and in opposition to the Democrat-led government. Nevertheless, by picking up an additional 11 seat margin over the opposition, the coalition now clearly has more support in the legislature than it did on December 15, when Abhisit Vejjajiva won the House election for Prime Minister by a margin of 235 (54.3 percent) to 198 (45.7 percent).

¶8. (SBU) MPs currently unaffiliated with a party appear likely to form a new party or move to one of the Democrat Party's partners, rather than to the Democrat Party itself. After the certification of by-election results, the Democrats appear likely to hold 173 seats, 10 behind the likely 183 total for the Puea Thai Party. Thus, the Democrats will remain heavily dependent on the support of their coalition allies.

COMPLAINTS

¶9. (SBU) According to open sources and Embassy contacts, the authorities received approximately three dozen formal complaints after the by-elections. Most complaints entailed

minor violations, such as the illegal sale of alcohol during an election period, the improper placement of a campaign banner, or the insulting of an election official. Other complaints pertained to vote-buying or intimidation. None of the complaints appeared to tarnish the by-elections generally, and media coverage indicates most Thais accept the by-election results as legitimate.

GUBERNATORIAL RACE

¶10. (SBU) Separate from the by-elections, former Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra won election as Bangkok Governor, according to preliminary election results. Sukhumbhand prevailed over the Puea Thai candidate by a wide margin -- no surprise, given the strong support for the Democrat Party in Bangkok in the 2007 legislative election and the past two Bangkok governor elections. Sukhumbhand will replace Apirak Kosayothin, who won re-election as Bangkok Governor in October 2008 but resigned in November after the National Counter Corruption Commission found there to be merit in accusations that he had acted improperly in a high-profile case involving the procurement of fire trucks by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority.

JOHN